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Beyond Utopian and Dystopian approaches to democratic innovation

Más allá de enfoques utópicos y distópicos sobre innovación democrática

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Abstract

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Key Words: democratic innovations, representation, participation, direct politics, indirect politics.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los mitos que se han construido, tanto en un plano conceptual como de efectos esperados, en torno a las denominadas *innovaciones democráticas*, entendidas como instituciones destinadas a incrementar la participación ciudadana más allá de las elecciones. Argumentamos que tanto estos mitos como la (ficticia) confrontación entre política directa e indirecta ha generado falsas oposiciones y reduccionismos que enmascaran el debate y limitan el estudio empírico de la innovación democrática. Una agenda de investigación basada en el concepto de *ecologías participativas* se sugiere para el entendimiento de los mecanismos de participación en forma sistemática.

Palabras clave: innovación democrática, representación, política directa, política indirecta.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there has been a growth in the number of institutions aimed at increasing public participation beyond regular elections, commonly defined in Europe as involving 'Democratic Innovations' and in the Americas as 'Participatory Democracy'. Among their main goals – at least the explicit ones – are the revitalization of democracy and the resolution of the legitimacy deficit that now characterizes contemporary democracies. With these propositions in mind, the focus on democratic innovations aims to include citizens in decision-making processes beyond the election of representatives (Cameron, Hershberg & Sharpe, 2012; Font, Della Porta & Sintomer, 2014; Smith, 2009; Wampler & Avritzer, 2005). Such inclusion comprises different characteristics with regard to who can participate (e.g. individuals or civil society associations) and how they do so (e.g. by defining the agenda or through deliberation, consultation, elaboration of proposals and/or decision-making, as well as implementation and oversight). Some experiences seek to complement and improve electoral representation, for example with agenda-initiatives, while others propose to replace electoral representation by introducing sortition at all levels.[1] The diversity of strategies used includes the creation of mixed partisan and citizen conventions chosen by lottery to develop proposals for constitutional reforms, as was seen in Ireland in 2012 (see Farrell, Harris & Suiter, 2017); participation in broad multi-channel deliberative processes, as seen in the G1000 in Belgium (see Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015); the deployment of communal councils with the capacity to directly manage budgets, as seen in Venezuela (see Garcia Guadilla, 2008); the implementation of national conferences and councils of public policies, as seen in Brazil (see De Melo Romao, Gurza Lavalle & Zaremberg, 2017); the implementation of participatory budgeting, as seen globally in a number of countries (Goldfrank, 2011; Sintomer et al., 2008); the implementation of new technologies to promote citizen participation (Borge, Colombo & Welp, 2009); and the proliferation of traditional mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) (Ruth, Whitehead & Welp, 2017).

The mechanisms enacted and/or implemented are as diverse as the studies conducted on them. Scholarly research has been characterized by the focus on specific institutions (i.e. participatory budgeting or MDDs) or on experiences by region or country (i.e. Europe, Latin America, Brazil, Venezuela, amongst

[1] Such as Van Reybrouck's (2016) proposal in *Against Elections*.

other notable cases). The focus on mechanisms, areas or countries has led to sometimes contradictory conclusions on the outcomes of democratic innovations. Thus, results are understood both as a driving force promoting populism as well as clientelism (Rhodes Purdy, 2015; De La Torre 2013) or, conversely, as a means of citizen empowerment and source of democratic legitimacy (Fishkin, 2009). Other studies have considered most of the participatory processes analysed as a symbolic exercise of scarce value (Saati, 2015) or, on the contrary, as a tool for promoting critical civic values (Barber 1984). Finally, many authors consider participation as an instrument for building consensus (Cohen 1997), while others as a mechanism for polarization and manipulation (Balderacchi, 2015). Something similar has happened regarding the new technologies, where studies are divided between those that highlight an instrumental use (i.e. manipulation), and those that emphasize the capacity to boost direct democratic participation (Morozov, 2009; Castells, 2009, respectively). Within this scenario, we maintain that in order to advance the analysis of democratic innovation it is necessary to 'demystify' its assumptions, avoiding both idealized as well as demonizing visions.

Here we propose that these contradictory conclusions are due to scholars' perpetuating myths related to citizens' participation and to the fact that different Participatory Institutions (PIs) and MDDs operate in different contexts and/or using different rules. Accordingly, our work discusses 'myths' that are explicitly or implicitly presented in the analysis of democratic innovations. Definitions of 'myth' allude to fabulous stories describing forces of nature or the human condition, both heroic as well as detestable, generally reflected in ancient gods. In the most prosaic way, the myth also alludes to imaginary stories that alter the true qualities of a person or thing. We consider that scholarly research – and political promotion – of institutions of participation has been influenced by positive vs. negative attributes given *ex ante*. The promotion of the virtues of a limited institution such as participatory budgeting (Goldfrank, 2011) by the World Bank could be considered an example of an acritical positive view, supported by scholars of radical democracy (De Sousa Santos and Avritzer, 2004). The demonization of referendums is an example of negative out-of-context criticism (Franklin, Marsh & Wlezien, 1994).

We consider that these preconceptions have generated false opposition and reductionisms obscuring the debate. Reductionist conceptions do not adequately permit the establishment of relations with outcome variables such as democratization, inclusion or political conflict. Meanwhile, participatory

institutions are at a crossroads in places in which the same democratic system has recently been neglected, as in Venezuela. But it keeps growing in other places, such as with the sortition in Ireland, where only in May 2018 the proposal to liberalize one of the most restrictive abortion regimes in the world,[2] submitted by an assembly that had been selected by sortition, was ratified by referendum. Still more impressive seems to be the creation of laboratories of innovation in European and Latin American cities (Feenstra, Tormey, Casero-Ripollés & Keane, 2017). Thus, these myths need to be reviewed in order to produce a more accurate framework where mechanisms of participation could be properly understood. This will permit the development of methodologies to assess the effects of these innovations, not in contrast with normative idealizations, but with parameters based on empirical evidence. Emphasis will be placed first on myths that we refer to as myths of 'conceptualization' and then on those that revolve around the assumed 'effects' of participation. Finally, our conclusions are presented.

1. MYTHS OF CONCEPTUALIZATION

1.1 The Rousseaunian mith

The *Rousseaunian myth* comes from a classic debate among theorists of representation. According to a simplified vision, direct participation, expressed particularly in assemblies, would be normatively superior to the election of representatives by avoiding the 'fiction' attributed to indirect politics. The characteristic of 'indirect', therefore, is understood as the process in which to represent means "the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact" (Pitkin, 1985:10).

In reference to the seminal work by Hanna Pitkin, several authors have highlighted the fact that political representation offers a number of contradictions, as expressed in the paradox of making the absent present (Gurza Lavalle, 2017). This leads to another paradox with representation offering contradictory elements: primacy of the citizen's mandate and, at the same time, independence of representatives with regard to this mandate. This

[2] This was the sixth referendum on the subject in the past 35 years but the last was called to decide on the proposal of a citizens' assembly elected by sortition. Voters supported the repeal of Article 40.3.3 – known as the eighth amendment – which gives unborn foetuses and pregnant women an equal right to life. Until now the penalty for undergoing an illegal abortion was up to 14 years in prison.

would imply that representative governments involve both aristocratic and democratic elements (Manin, 1997). In the myth of direct participation, here referred to as the Rousseaunian myth, this paradox is resolved in favour of the represented, the existence of the representatives being annulled.

In other words, the Rousseaunian myth opposes direct participation in electoral representation, assuming that the second is negative. But as Plotke (1997) suggests, the opposite of representation is not participation but exclusion, while the opposite of participation is abstention. This false opposition has theoretical but also historical roots, given that it is based on the soviet experience, associated with the leftist ideology.

The Soviet experience conditioned the theoretical development of the concepts of representation and participation during the twentieth century.[3] In the wake of the Second World War, the Soviet experience exacerbated the distance between representation and participation. On the other side of the wall, the liberal theory of representation would increasingly retreat to the confined framework of representative democracies with elections as both the only mechanisms to distribute political power and the superior method of representation. In certain liberal sectors settled in countries in the north-western quadrant, participation became synonymous with authoritarianism (Schumpeter, 1983). Between the notion of 'imperative mandate' and the liberal notion of representation, following Plotke (1997), those theorists that defended the participatory component as part of a social-democratic programme were ignored. In other words, the option of a positive relationship between representative government and participation in democratic contexts was increasingly asphyxiated.

The 'authoritarian-participation'–'democratic-representation' dichotomy began to crack in the 1970s and even more so with the fall of the Berlin wall at the end of the 1980s. As an example, since the 1990s, all German federal states (*Bundesländer)* have introduced referendums at the state and local levels, which can be launched by respective authorities or by citizens (Geissel, 2017). Through diffusion or *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the time), diverse mechanisms of participation and citizen control have since then expanded in various parts of the world, complementing and enriching the relationship between participation and electoral representation as a way of deepening democracy.

[3] This is expressed in the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of the Soviet project, giving rise to the process of "democratic centralisation" introduced following the Russian revolution in 1917. Around 1935, with the consolidation of the Stalinist regime, this project increasingly acquired an authoritarian turn (Fitzpatrick, 1994).

Offering a re-reading of the classics, Carole Pateman (1970) underlines the role of participation in revitalizing democracy, while Benjamin Barber (1984), from a pragmatic philosophical position, highlights the educational virtues of participation in the construction of full citizenship. Nevertheless, these works continue to consider electoral representation as *second best* (the best possible) in comparison with direct participation (again, idealized in the form of assemblies).

The works by Urbinati (2006) and Warren (2001) were crucial. After revisiting the classical writings of Condorcet, Urbinati proposed that indirect politics were not inherently inferior to the direct form. In this sense, Condorcet's vision was highlighted in terms of the capacity of indirect politics to restrain the contextual and instantaneous 'passions' of direct politics. In contrast, indirect mechanisms allow for sufficiently reasoned decision-making, which is generally more beneficial for the common good. It is only from this standpoint that it becomes possible to think of a complete participatory engineering that does not exclude representation or reduce the indirect to the simply electoral. Warren dismantles the idea of idealized participation regarding civil society associations. From his perspective, there are different kinds of associations, each of them having at the same time both negative and positive democratic effects. In this sense, there is no normative desideratum for the associative world because there is no inherently best setting for democracy. As we will see, this is crucial to undo the sterile opposition between participation and representation. In "Between the 'fiction' of representation and the 'faction' of direct democracy", Laurence Whitehead (2017) goes further to show the extent to which both forms are combined in reality: "Just as direct forms of democracy were mixed in with the representative variant from the earliest days of the American Republic, so also in the supposedly pure city state democracies of ancient Greece, representative and direct variants also always coexisted" (Whitehead, 2017: 9).

1.2 The myth of the scarecrow, or myth of a single word

By establishing a fictitious opposition between participation and representative government, the Rousseaunian myth obscures the richness and diversity of participatory experiences. Neglecting the heterogeneity of participatory experiences allows its detractors to define it in negative terms and to suggest that aside from the electoral rules, nothing valuable exists beyond informal, *clientelistic* practices or mere symbolic exercises. In contrast,

studies of social movements and civil society tend to consider protest or contentious movements as 'real or genuine' participation, identifying it as pure activism, generally in positive terms. This is rooted in the idea (based on a Habermasian approach) that locates civil organizations within the life-world, which is essentially different from the world of the state and the market (Alvarez, Baiocchi, Lao-Montes, Rubin & Miller, 2017; Gurza Lavalle & Szwako, 2015; Della Porta, 2013).

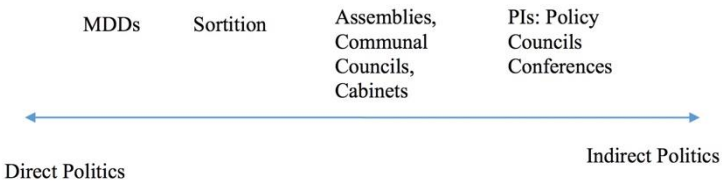
These dichotomies obscure the analysis of participatory experiences and invite the development of classifications capable of overcoming reductionisms and capturing the complexity of the phenomena. For example, many participatory mechanisms are based on the actions of representatives or intermediaries, even when they are not elected. This sustains the distinction between direct and indirect politics. Indirect politics involves some degree of intermediation, whereas direct politics does not. Direct politics includes institutions based on individual votes such as referendums and popular initiatives, as well as some kind of assemblies. Indirect politics displays what are usually known as Participatory Institutions (PIs), such as councils, conferences or other types of socio-state interfaces. In these PIs members of civil society, labour unions, civil servants and business representatives generally participate, and speak in the name of different citizens and or groups. These mechanisms of indirect politics characterize one of the world's best known examples of participatory democracy: Brazil.

Most of the PIs in Brazil have been set up in specific sectors of public policy, and as such are also referred to as public policy councils and conferences. Contrary to the MDDs, PIs do not tend to include 'transcendental' issues in their agenda, such as constitutional reforms or long-term geopolitical decisions. Participation occurs mostly through delegates that 'speak in the name of' a given group – women, poor neighbourhoods, victims of human rights abuse, etc. This leads to a specific type of representation (virtual) in which representatives are not authorized by a formal procedure (e.g. a vote) and are sometimes not even acknowledged as such by the citizens referred to.[4] However, these intermediaries are recognized and 'authorized', in terms of their own personal trajectory and prestige or the recognition of the organizations they work for, to advocate for the rights of others. This implies that all dimensions shaping the intermediation are activated, together with

[4] See more about the concept of virtual representation related to Burke's theoretical framework in Pitkin (1985).

the typical issues profusely dealt with by the theory of representation (Zaremberg, Guarneros-Meza & Gurza Lavalle, 2017). In short, the frontier between direct and indirect politics is more blurred than is generally admitted. The lack of dialogue between those that study mechanisms based on votes and those focused on mechanisms that do not use electoral authorization does not contribute to an understanding of the grey areas between such options. Graduations, mixtures and overlaps exist between direct and indirect politics, rather than airtight boundaries. The following graph shows several participation mechanisms located on a continuum that goes from direct to indirect politics:

Graph 1: Participatory mechanisms by a direct-indirect politics continuum



Source: Prepared by the authors

As the graph shows, on the one hand, sortition is emerging as a mechanism combining even more options and inviting more comprehensive approaches than traditional mechanisms such as referendums. On the other hand, indirect participatory mechanisms, such as assemblies (considered the paradigm of direct democracy), are not located at the extreme of direct politics. The next section will develop this in more detail.

1.3 The myth of eliminating intermediation

The frontier between direct politics (in the assembly version) and indirect politics is not as clear as suggested: neither participation in assemblies nor

virtual representation preclude intermediation.[5] This is evident in the case of the Venezuelan communal councils, where spokespeople become leaders who act as intermediaries, clearly fulfilling functions of indirect politics (García Guadilla, 2016). Thus, while participation of the 'common citizen' is idealized, the spectrum of intermediations includes partisan control and manipulation. While in theory the source of sovereignty is formally established in communal assemblies (every 400 families in urban areas and every 200 in rural areas, self-defined as communities by proximity and affinity), in practice it can be observed that direct participation does not avoid intermediation as conceived in the myth. The Council of Citizen Participation and Social Control contained in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 works as another good example.[6] Although it acquired competences of the legislative assembly and was not made up of partisan positions, it quickly came to be directly controlled by the government (De la Torre & Ortiz Lemos, 2016).

Constraint mechanisms between citizens and intermediaries are a classic dimension of representation identified as mechanisms of accountability. Also evident in the theory of representation are dilemmas regarding the authorization of intermediaries. How are these roles assigned and by whom? Studies have emphasized that, beyond elections, there are other forms of authorization in terms of recognizing intermediaries (Abers, Neaera & Keck, 2013; Dowbor & Houtzager, 2014). For example, the shared history of a common project, reputation (and the cost of losing it) and proximity (not only geographical but also ideological) constitute other forms of recognizing / authorizing certain intermediaries that act in PIs (Zaremberg, Guarneros-Meza & Gurza Lavalle, 2017).

The myth of eliminating intermediation does not even hold firm in sortition experiences, as these are in the process of defining procedures and selection criteria, the agenda and relationship with other institutions (government, parliament) and mechanisms (referendums) that anchor the

[5] A particularly delicate issue is to what degree can the same be argued in cases of assemblies in indigenous communities. While dealing with these questions exceeds the boundaries of this paper, we nevertheless suggest that some studies indicate that mechanisms of assemblies in these communities are not always in accordance with idealized images. This depends on the hybridization of political (for example, co-option of leaders), economic (for example, the presence of mega-projects), social (migration) and cultural (*mestizaje*, access to information networks, etc.) processes. Some studies clearly indicate the existence of an individual level that is different from the communal or the presence of conflicts between indigenous leaders and members of the community (see Eisenstadt, 2011).

[6] Its institutional design has been challenged in the referendum of 4 February 2018 given the high level of control granted to the authorities in the former definition.

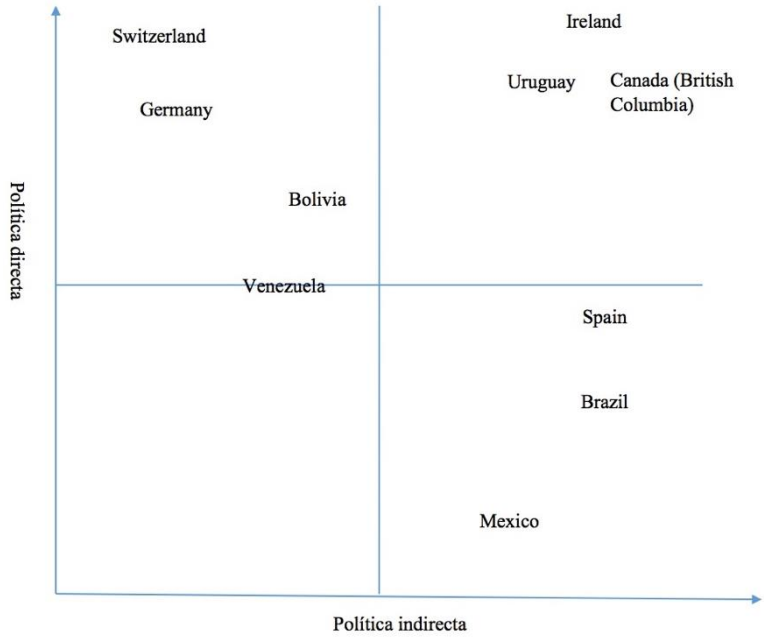
myth of direct participation in numerous mediations. The use of sortition to generate suggestions for constitutional reform in Ireland is a key example (see Farrell, Harris and Suiter, 2017).

1.4 The myth of the vote as an exclusive element of representation

Initiatives and referendums enable voting on issues, which may be more or less transcendental, from local public works to questions of constitutional order and also on authorities (i.e. recall referendums). When plebiscites or referendums are called 'from above' – by presidents or prime ministers – the decision regarding a particular issue, for example, the exit of Great Britain from the European Union (known as Brexit) or the peace agreement in Colombia, tends to remain conditional on the support or rejection of the organizing government (Le Duc, 2002). In contrast, when organized 'from below', the purpose tends to be more centred on societal control and the expression of citizens' preferences. In either case, the objective of the vote in MDDs is not to choose representatives. However, in both cases context matters and patterns of activation can diverge (Serdült & Welp, 2012). In this sense, it is noticeable that paradigmatic participatory experiences – such as the Brazilian one – have not considered a greater inter-relationship with MDDs, although this has begun to occur with some frequency in experiences that combine deliberation, through random selection, and decision-making through referendums, as in British Columbia, Ontario and Ireland.

Considering PIs in terms of participatory ecologies, where the vote is not an instrument only confined to the election of representative governments, would broaden the possibilities for the mutual improvement of electoral representation and participation. In this way, a range of countries could be plotted with these coordinates, based on existing legislation on PIs and MDDs, and guided by the new (blurred and gradual) frontier between direct and indirect politics:

Graph 2: Location of countries according to Direct and Indirect politics (MDDs and PIs)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on legislation on PIs and MDDs

This graph is a tentative exercise in classifying cases according to existing legislation on mechanisms of participation, taking into account both the national as well as the sub-national space. Thus, Switzerland is located in the upper quadrant of direct politics, with scarce or no advocacy for indirect mechanisms as observed on a local, cantonal and sub-national level (Colombo, 2018). Spain, in contrast, is identified as a case that allows the deployment of indirect mechanisms, with scarce advocacy (although some practices have recently been registered) of direct mechanisms on a local level, particularly in Madrid and Barcelona since 2015. Germany, on the other hand, shows greater advocacy for direct mechanisms (referendums) on a sub-national level (Geissel, 2017).

With this focus, countries that have been considered pioneers in democratic innovation, such as Brazil, are in fact located in the quadrant that shows a high presence of indirect mechanisms (the above-mentioned PIs: councils and conferences). The exception would be the assemblies planned for participatory budgeting, which would involve mixed mechanisms (direct and indirect). It is significant that this mechanism has decreased over the last 12 years in Brazil, while the PIs concentrated in councils and conferences (especially those induced federally), have increased (Spada, 2014). In contrast, Uruguay is located in the quadrant in which both types of mechanisms (direct and indirect) are present. Bolivia is placed a few degrees above, regarding direct politics, due to the "social control" practised by communities based on indigenous tradition (Zuazo, 2017). Nevertheless, the heterogeneity in the functioning of these mechanisms in different indigenous communities with different levels of *mestizaje* (race fusion) should be studied more systematically (see footnote 4). Similar considerations can be made for the extended participation mechanism called prior consultation, contained in the International Labor Organization's ILO Convention 169 (approved in 1989) with the aim of protecting indigenous livelihoods and their natural environments. This international norm afforded indigenous people in the postcolonial world the right to be consulted by their governments about any project that could have an impact on their territory (Torres Wong, 2018; Falleti & Riofrancos, 2018).

Finally, note that Graph 2 does not seek to locate the cases in terms of effectiveness of democratization, citizen inclusion, etc. We will deal with these issues in the following section.

2. MYTHS OF EFFECTS

What are the best criteria for evaluating the performance of the participatory mechanisms classified above? A certain degree of idealization exists with respect to the contribution that participation should make: improving inclusion, opening the agenda, promoting progressive legislation, overcoming the crisis of representative democracy and the legitimacy deficit (Cabannes, 2004; De Sousa Santos & Avritzer, 2004, Seele & Peruzzotti, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003).

The classification proposed here allows for the development of more adequate parameters of evaluation by better identifying expectations for each

mechanism and the problems it addresses. For example, the results of the so-called PIs generally tend to be evaluated in terms of what would usually be expected from mechanisms of direct participation in the form of assemblies, without accounting for the challenges of virtual representation exercised by members of civil society organizations. The lack of an adequate distinction between mechanisms in which ordinary citizens participate directly and PIs that are mainly comprised of people exercising virtual representation does not help to develop adequate criteria with which to assess the results of PIs in comparison with the results of parliamentary bodies.

If these institutions are judged on the basis of the ideal of Rousseaunian participation, the experience of the councils of public policy in Brazil could be conceived as deficient, as they reflect various problems inherent in representation, for example, disconnection with 'ordinary citizens'. If these same PIs are compared with parliamentary representation, however, it could be argued that they did achieve the inclusion of issues, populations and citizens' interests that the elected representatives had not taken to the field of political decisions. It is also possible to analyse the performance of these institutions by comparing their capacity to exercise societal control over different areas of public policies (education, health, etc.) with what has been achieved in this area in parliamentary representation (Gurza Lavalle & Isunza Vera, 2011). Distancing ourselves from a dichotomized point of view would allow for a more accurate evaluation of these PIs.

2.1 Myth of the democratization cure vs. authoritarian poison

The optimistic visions regarding participation tend to implicitly or explicitly suggest an inherent relationship between participation and democratization. However, following Warren, the participation of organizations in political life can simultaneously create both positive and negative effects in certain types of 'democratic goods' (Warren, 2001). A single organization can teach a group of citizens that participate in it to be more active and committed to the community, while at the same time generate exclusionary effects (for example, a religious organization that does not accept certain minorities).

The way to consider the complex relationship between participation and democracy is, according to the above-mentioned author, to think in terms of 'associational ecologies'. The balance between a plurality of organizations is what could begin to be evaluated in terms of democratizing contributions.

What can have a democratizing effect is the existence of ecologies that are open to associational diversity to the extent that they produce trade-offs that facilitate balanced results. Because associations may have positive and negative democratic effects at the same time, the idea of associational ecologies is more complex than considering it as simple pluralism. There are different levels or dimensions of democratic effects (i.e. individual autonomy, collective autonomy and institutional conditions). There is no association that contributes "purely" to democracy. An association may contribute with a democratic good at the individual level, while at the collective or the institutional level (or vice versa) it does not. In a participatory ecology there is no single mechanism that is able to deliver all the virtuous democratic effects.[7] Empirical evidence supports this proposition. For example, a positive balance of participatory mechanisms was observed in Ireland with the combination of a citizen's assembly selected by sortition, which opened an informed debate about abortion, and a referendum, as a fair mechanism to make legitimate decisions. A negative balance is exemplified by the experience with recall referendums in Japan, where recall is activated more against policies than against authorities; however, as the first is binding and easier than the activation of initiative, it is used more frequently (see Okamoto & Serdült, 2016).

Similarly, some authors have begun to analyse the diversity of participatory experiences in terms of regimes of participation or regimes of democratic non-electoral control, with the understanding that contributions to the creation of democratizing effects require a series of mechanisms that promote citizen control over representative government (Isunza Vera & Gurza Lavalle, 2010; Isunza Vera, 2014).

2.2 Polarizing poison vs. consensual cure

For some scholars, participation goes hand in hand with deliberation and the achievement of consensus (Dryzek, 2010; Rosenberg, 2007). Yet recent studies on participation in the digital sphere show that without coordination and rules of behaviour, deliberative processes can often generate

[7] We thank Adrián Gurza Lavalle for introducing the perspective of Warren to approach participatory institutions in a systematic way. Other researchers, such as Wagner Romao, Ernesto Isunza Vera and Debora Rezende, also share their reflections on the necessity of thinking about participation not as single mechanisms.

polarization and disqualifications (McClurg, 2003; Zaremberg, 2018). In contrast, to mitigate the polarization and binary exercise attributed to mechanisms of direct democracy, the Swiss experience shows that institutional designs can develop more complex and inclusive options and that learning processes generate mechanisms for bargaining. For example, a citizens' initiative can be voted together with a counterproposal presented by the parliament and even with a third proposal negotiated between promoters of the initiative and members of parliament (to which a fourth option, maintaining the status quo, can be added) (Serdült, 2018). Information and clear shared exchange rules are the key, as is the conventional election of authorities. This leads one to think of mechanisms of participation not as isolated institutions, but rather as being embedded in a broader framework and set of conditions that go beyond specific institutional designs (Rosenberg, 2007; Dryzek, 2002).

The recall referendums, a mechanism oriented towards removing a representative by a popular vote before the end of her or his term, offer good insights to think about mechanisms of participation which are seen from highly polarized views among scholars. Recall might provide a 'safety valve' to allow those discontented with a given representative to feel that they had been allowed to protest and could influence the government by removing the inadequate individual or authority, and could thus remain basically loyal to the electoral process and its democratic principles. However, recall can also work in the opposite direction. The findings of most recent research show that variations in the recall experience can prove highly consequential for the structure and quality of the associated democratic process, and that in many cases the 'safety valve' justification is inadequate. Hence, the balance between positive and negative outcomes largely depends on the legitimacy and robustness of the political system as well as on the design features of the recall mechanism itself and on the very specific context in which it was first adopted and then adapted (Whitehead, 2018). A crucial issue is whether the result of the recall is accepted by the losers, as well as the winners, and this depends not solely on whether the process is procedurally correct and generates a public benefit, but also on whether the electorate is inclined to demand institutional compliance from all its political operators. Without falling into relativism, it is crucial to keep in mind that context matters when determining the effectiveness and acceptability of any given procedural rule, since each society develops its own traditions and collective understandings about the rightness of claims to political authority.

2.3 Myth of inclusion

For many authors, participation involves a progressive element with the inclusion of minorities and disadvantaged sectors in the political arena (Wampler, 2015; Villasante, 2017). However, there is abundant evidence that participatory spaces can promote exclusion and results that are contrary to the rights of disadvantaged groups. An eloquent example of this is the case of the Women's Parliament in Mexico, created in April 1998, during the LVII Legislature (1997-2000), as a space for exchange with civil society organizations in order to build consensus around the legislative agenda. According to Martinez Medina (2016), in the following Legislature this space was taken over by conservative organizations and women who, in their personal capacity, entered proposals against abortion and promoting the family, morality and religion. Following this, and despite the activity of legislators proposing various mediation strategies, the confrontation could not be contained and thus the legislative agenda became increasingly splintered from the Women's Parliament. In this way, it is clear that participation mechanisms are conflictive spaces. An idealization of their democratizing virtues prevents us from being attentive to the inclusion of actors who, from monolithic worldviews or privileged positions, seek the exclusion of others.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The reflections presented here on the conceptualization and attributed effects of participation navigate between the two meanings of the word 'myth'. One of them involves fabulous stories, generally referring to ancient times (as the idea of democracy in classical Athens is taken nowadays), while the other refers to imaginary stories that alter the true qualities of a thing, person or process. This would be the case, for example, of the idealized experience of sortition in Iceland 2011, which had much less significant effects than expected, but helped to build utopian thoughts around new models of democracy.

On the one hand, the dichotomy generated by what we have called the 'Rousseaunian myth' confirms that participation is neither opposed to representative government nor by default virtuous in the face of the 'corruption' of representation. What is more, it becomes mythical to consider that the elements of direct politics oppose elements of indirect politics.

Building an airtight border between direct and indirect politics amounts to converting participation and representation into mere 'scarecrows'. Furthermore, the act of voting does not always imply choosing representatives and neither does the act of participation (in an assembly, for example) always mean deciding directly. The MDDs analysed here make use of the vote not to choose whom to delegate representation to, but rather to promote the citizens' direct decision on more or less transcendental questions. On the other hand, the public policy councils and conferences (such as those in Brazil), despite referring to themselves as participatory institutions (PIs), require complex intermediation processes that revive a series of problems (of authorization, control, etc.) dealt with by representation theory. Not even the communal councils, highlighted in the Bolivarian Venezuelan project from 2006 as the superior source of popular sovereignty, are 'saved' from building intermediation through the figure of spokespeople.

The delineation of these myths of conception also allows the clarification of flawed expectations that have repeatedly occurred regarding possible effects of participation mechanisms. The heterogeneity of these mechanisms, together with their different historical composition and institutional designs, makes the bid for simplified and reductionist results or evaluations trivial. It is not possible to evaluate PIs (for example, the policy management councils in Brazil) with the same criteria as the expected effects of the application of MDDs. Neither is it possible to always expect democratizing, consensual or inclusive effects from these mechanisms, called, perhaps too hopefully, 'democratic innovation'. The opposite is also unwise, that is, to expect them to display all ills (authoritarianism, polarization and exclusion).

Research in this area shows, instead, that the most productive path is to conceive, analyse and evaluate these mechanisms in terms of the participatory ecologies and policies in which they are inserted. Whether it is applied to ecological terms or regimes of participation or societal control, the perspective outlined by Warren (2001) seems effective. It is possible to expect effects in terms of a *trade-off* of a particular social organization and also of a particular participatory mechanism. In this way, a single element can provide both democratic goods as well as ills. However, deepening democracy does not imply annulling or limiting either associational social life or mechanisms and institutions, whether they are participatory or representative. On the contrary, the challenge consists in seeking the balanced co-existence of all these elements.

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